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## Drug czar, aide face meth criticism

**A Republican congressman calls for the adviser to step down from the federal post**

Thursday, September 29, 2005

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**The Oregonian**

WASHINGTON -- The chairman of a House panel that oversees drug policy on Wednesday called for the resignation of a top aide to White House drug czar John Walters, and he came close to demanding that Walters step down as well.

Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., spoke after a closed-door briefing in which Bush administration officials described their efforts to halt the spread of methamphetamine abuse.

Souder, chairman of the House committee that authorizes the activities of Walters' office, called the presentation "pathetic" and "an embarrassment." He said officials seemed more interested in defending the status quo than developing a meaningful national meth strategy.

"If they continue to defend the way they're going," he said, "it's time for some of the top people to resign."

Souder said later in an interview that he specifically wanted the resignation of Dave Murray, a Walters adviser, who led the briefing. But Souder also suggested Walters should go, as well.

"Clearly, if he does not lead, we need a change of the drug czar," Souder said. He added later, "If Director Walters and anyone else in that office agrees with what was said today, they should resign."

Murray, who was at the news conference, declined to comment extensively afterward.

"We had an interesting discussion roundtable with them," Murray said. "I thought it was pretty productive."

Ken Lisaius, a White House spokesman, said the administration "continues to have faith in Director Walters and his effort to continue to address the drug issues that our nation faces. He will continue to work on the part of the federal government and this administration to address those issues."

Souder and others from districts with large meth problems have repeatedly criticized the administration's effort to deal with the illicit drug, but his latest remarks were his strongest attack yet.

It comes a year after the Bush administration unveiled its National Synthetic Drugs Action Plan, a sweeping blueprint for curtailing the use of meth and its production. The administration's plan described in a wide array of directions for U.S. policy -- from working internationally to curb the illicit trade in pseudoephedrine, meth's main ingredient, to improved treatment.

But the availability of meth on the street has only grown since then. The purity of meth nationally continued to rise, as it has since 1999, and is now at its highest level in a decade, The Oregonian found in a recent analysis of DEA data.

Members of the bipartisan House Methamphetamine Caucus say the White House has failed to turn its meth plan into a workable strategy that includes new policy initiatives or measurable goals. The lawmakers have attacked the administration for proposing budget cuts to local drug task forces this year and have accused Walters' office of downplaying the threat that meth poses.

Wednesday's meeting, attended by about 20 House members, featured officials from the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the State Department.

Administration officials outlined success stories in the fight against meth, such as a sharp reduction in the number of "superlabs" operated by Mexican traffickers in the United States, according to people who attended.

The administration officials also discussed promising treatment techniques, and they said cooperation had improved with Hong Kong, Mexico and other countries where drug cartels obtain pseudoephedrine.

But participants said the officials did not request any additional help from Congress at a time when meth continues to flow into towns across the country.

"We already are aware of what the administration is doing," said Rick Larsen, D-Wash., a co-chair of the Meth Caucus. "We're not convinced it is part of a full, comprehensive strategy with the right amount of resources."

Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., one of the founders of the caucus, said administration officials seemed out of touch with the problems that House members are hearing back home from sheriffs and the children of meth users.

"The official message was, 'We are doing a great deal about methamphetamine right now,' " Baird said.

"If they're trying to tell us that they have fully grasped the problem and are responding to the problem proportionally to its impact on our communities, then they're either dissembling, or they're clueless," he said.

Souder's lack of confidence in the drug czar's office carries repercussions. At the extreme, Souder said, his committee has the authority to write legislation naming who should fill each position in Walters' office.

The more likely course, however, is less drastic. Souder said he has been unwilling so far to micromanage the activities of the office, allowing Walters to set priorities internally. But now, Souder said, he is willing to start directing specific action on meth.

"I don't trust the director's office to make the decisions anymore," Souder said.

Lisaius, the White House spokesman, said the administration recognizes the "critical threat posed by meth." Citing the Synthetic Drugs Action Plan, he said the White House is actively working to address the problem.

"Meth is undeniably a uniquely destructive drug," Lisaius said, "and it brings with it a litany of problems that need to be dealt with at all levels."

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